

**Testimony of Deputy Assistant Secretary Brett McGurk
House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing: Iraq**

February 5, 2014

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the situation in Iraq with a focus on al-Qa'ida's primary offshoot in Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Threat Posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

I will begin with a brief overview of the security situation in 2011 and 2012, as it is important to understanding the current environment. In both years, 2011 and 2012, Iraq remained a very violent country. By our counts, 4,400 Iraqis were killed each year, most in attacks by extremist groups led by al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI).

While this violence was persistent and targeted, it did not threaten the stability of the state, or a rekindled civil war. Indeed, based on studies of historical parallels – civil wars and insurgencies – Iraq by 2012 had entered what is called a “low boil” stage of insurgency. A low boil insurgency reflects a level of violence that may not present a serious risk of state collapse, or rekindled broad scale reprisals, but rather a persistent tempo of attacks carried out by the hardened core of an insurgency – which, by historical examples, can take a decade to fizzle out.

These two years, 2011 and 2012, also witnessed the escalating civil war in Syria, inflamed by regional rivalry and opportunism by terrorist groups. The Assad regime's unwillingness to engage with the opposition in meaningful political dialogue and violent suppression of peaceful protests led to open, armed conflict. As the fighting has dragged on, the conflict has attracted terrorist groups seeking to take advantage of the loss of state authority, including in eastern Syria, leading to the rise of terrorist groups near the Iraq border.

The most organized and lethal of these groups – the al-Nusrah Front and ISIL – were franchises of AQI. They vary in their objectives: al-Nusrah has put greater priority on the toppling of Assad and working with other Syrian opposition groups, whereas ISIL has focused on a more regional agenda, with an aim to carve out an Islamic caliphate stretching from Baghdad to Lebanon. These dueling objectives have at times required direct mediation by Osama Bin Laden's former deputy, and now global head of al-Qa'ida, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The debate has been a central

focus among global jihadist networks, and has given ISIL, in particular, a global platform to propagate its agenda and recruit adherents.

Flush with resources, recruits, weapons, and training, ISIL slowly began to execute its strategy across the Syrian border in Iraq. Violence in Iraq ticked up towards the end of 2012, but did not accelerate until early 2013. This included a marked rise in suicide bombers. The majority of these suicide bombers, we believe, are foreign fighters, recruited through extremist propaganda. Suicide bombers are a key data point we track, as they have a pernicious effect on the stability of Iraq, and demonstrate a sophisticated global network that is able to recruit, train, and deploy human beings to commit suicide and mass murder. The suicide bombers are, in a twisted turn of logic, ISIL's most precious resource.

It was significant, therefore, that by early 2013, we began to see signs of ISIL shifting these resources from Syria to Iraq. In 2012, Iraq witnessed an average of 5-10 suicide attacks per month. By the summer of 2013, it was averaging 30-40 suicide attacks per month, and increasingly coordinated and effective attacks. On March 14, 2013, for example, five suicide bombers from ISIL attacked and took hostages in the Ministry of Justice in Baghdad, and controlled the building for several hours before detonating themselves. This was the first in a series of sophisticated military-style operations throughout 2013, with suicide bombers used to clear a path, followed by well-trained fighters to take and hold an objective.

By the summer of 2013, ISIL suicide bombers struck regularly, focused primarily on Shia civilian targets (playgrounds, funerals, markets), but also Sunni areas (to contest territory) and Kurdish areas (to spark ethnic conflict). In November 2013, Iraq witnessed 50 suicide attacks, compared with only three in November 2012. These attacks had a devastating effect on political discourse in the country, further fueling mistrust from political leaders to ordinary citizens, and making the tangible reforms that Iraq needs to reconcile its society even harder to reach.

Indeed, the violence may appear indiscriminate – but it is not. From what we are now seeing, ISIL attacks are calculated, coordinated, and part of a strategic campaign led by its Syria-based leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This campaign has the stated objective to cause the collapse of the Iraqi state and carve out a zone of governing control in the western regions of Iraq and eastern Syria (an area known as the “Jazeera”). To do this, they are now using three primary tactics:

- First, attacking Shia civilians with an aim to re-ignite a civil war and cause ordinary people to look to militias, not the state, for protection. Adherents to

ISIL's extreme ideology believe Shia should be killed based on their sect alone, and the suicide bombers seek populated areas to murder as many innocent people as possible. These are the vast majority of ISIL attacks.

- Second, contesting territory in Sunni areas to assert dominance over local Sunni officials and tribes. Targeted assassinations and attacks increased in these areas as ISIL focused its resources inside Iraq. In one 30-day period between September and October of last year, for example, more than a dozen suicide bombers were used in assaults on three towns in Anbar province (Rawa, Rutbah, and Haditha).
- Third, attacking the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) and disputed boundary areas in northern Iraq to stoke ethnic tensions and conflict. The thriving capital city of the IKR, Erbil, faced an attack in September similar to attacks seen in Baghdad earlier in the year: multiple suicide bombers followed by an infantry assault to temporarily control a government building.

By the end of 2013, suicide and vehicle-borne attacks initiated by ISIL returned to levels not seen since the height of AQI's power (its earlier incarnation) in 2007. Overall levels of violence, however, remain far below 2007 levels, demonstrating that reprisal attacks from Shia militias have been restrained, though the risks of such reprisals continue to rise as ISIL continues to attack Shia civilian areas.

In summary, ISIL's strategy is sophisticated, patient, and focused. It will take a similar combination of sophistication, patience, and focus to combat it, and I will explain shortly what this strategy should look like, and how we intend to help the Iraqis increase the chances that they can arrest these 2013 trend-lines in 2014.

Political Instability Enables ISIL Operations

The above picture would not be complete without discussing the political situation in Iraq, and how it does – and does not – impact these violence trends. Over the course of 2013, the security situation deteriorated against a backdrop of political instability and protests in Sunni areas of the country. These protests began after

Iraqi forces detained a number of bodyguards to then-Minister of Finance Rafa al-Issawi in late December 2012. Issawi later resigned from his post.¹

The guilt or innocence of the bodyguards and their detention soon became a side issue, as the protest demands grew to encompass a full catalog of decade-long grievances among Iraq's Sunni community. These grievances included appeals to end the process of de-Ba'athification, which began in 2003, reform the criminal procedure code to ensure due process rights to detainees, and greater power sharing in national governance decision-making and institutions.²

From the very beginning, participants in these protests varied: some had legitimate political demands, such as those listed above; others rejected the entire post-2003 political order and questioned the legitimacy of the state; while a small minority was openly militant and advocated violence against the central government. The latter two groups were often the most visible and vocal, which made it increasingly difficult (due to constituent pressure in some cases, excuses in others) to convince prominent Shia and Kurdish leaders to address demands from the first group.

The toxic combination of unaddressed grievances and rising terrorist attacks created a pressure cooker with no safety valve, and ISIL took advantage. Its black flags began to appear at protest squares, particularly in Fallujah, further alienating the Shia population and fueling the charged sectarian environment. In April, Iraqi forces moved to clear one of the most militant protest squares, in the north-central town of Hawija. The operation appears to have begun peacefully, but shots were later exchanged, followed by a barrage, leaving nearly 50 people dead.

After that incident, some Sunni nationalist insurgent groups, including Jaysh Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandi (JRTN), openly vowed to attack Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and declared a new offensive against Baghdad. The JRTN is a militant

¹ Rafa al-Issawi has been a close partner of the United States, and we believe his official status and standing should be restored as soon as possible. I met with Issawi earlier this month and found him committed and dedicated to helping isolate and defeat ISIL in Anbar province.

² We fully support addressing these grievances, and have worked with all political blocs to develop a package of laws that answer legitimate demands through the political process. In April, the Iraqi cabinet approved this package of laws, including sweeping reforms to the de-Ba'athification process. The Iraqi parliament, however, has yet to take up a vote on this package. This is partially due to pressing matters in other areas (such as passing the law to govern April elections, which took months of debate) and partially due to lack of support among the Shi'a and Kurdish blocs. We continue to call on all political blocs to work together and finalize this important package of laws for an up-or-down vote.

offshoot of the Iraqi Baath party, and together with AQI, designated under U.S. law as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Its resurgence added to the instability in Sunni areas, fueled mistrust in Shia areas, and facilitated the rise and entrenchment of ISIL, particularly in border regions of Ninewa province. Today, ISIL and JRTN appear to be working together in some areas, but with vastly different agendas – this partnership is likely to be short-lived.

The danger at this moment is that these hardened cores of militancy, which must be isolated from the broader population and defeated, become fused with a sense of despondency and grievance in Sunni areas of the country. It is therefore critical and incumbent upon the Government of Iraq (GOI) to help mobilize the people in Sunni areas against ISIL and JRTN through a combination of aggressive political outreach and targeted intelligence-driven security operations.

This responsibility for political outreach and inclusion rests on all Iraqi leaders, but most prominently on Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. He is under tremendous political pressure from the Shia population, which faces a near daily threat of car and suicide bombs; but it is incumbent upon the head of state to act in a manner that advances stability in all parts of Iraq. In all of our engagements with Maliki, accordingly, including a November meeting with the President, and regular calls from the Vice President, we have continued to press the urgency of working with local Sunni leaders to draw the population into the fight against ISIL.

The Current Situation: Fallujah and Ramadi

On January 1, 2014, convoys of approximately 70-100 trucks with mounted heavy weapons and anti-aircraft guns, flying the black flag of al-Qa'ida, entered the central cities of Fallujah and Ramadi. They deployed to key objectives, destroyed most police stations, and secured vital crossways. The police in both cities nearly disintegrated. The Iraqi army, deployed in camps outside the cities, engaged some armed vehicles but generally chose not to get drawn into urban fighting.

The domination of these central cities was a culmination of ISIL's 2013 strategy to govern territory and establish 7th-century Islamic rule. Across the border in Syria, ISIL has governed the city of Raqqa (with a population of 220,000) for most of the past year. In Iraq, ISIL sees Ramadi and Fallujah as their new Raqqa. In Fallujah, days after seizing central areas, ISIL declared the city part of an Islamic caliphate. This message, however, is not popular in Anbar – and has bred fierce resistance.

In Ramadi, in the hours after ISIL arrived in force, tribal leaders organized and asked for funding and arms from the central government to retake their streets and

protect their population. The GOI responded with \$17 million to support urgent humanitarian assistance and reconstruction of areas damaged in fighting. It also began sending small and medium weapons to tribal fighters, with assurance that these fighters would be given full benefits of the state, as if they were soldiers.

I was in Iraq in early January as this effort got underway. In meetings with Maliki and other key leaders, I pressed the urgent message that without a broad base of support from the population in Ramadi, it would be impossible to root out the hundreds of ISIL fighters who had taken up positions in strategic areas. I also discussed the situation with former leaders of the Anbar awakening, such as Sheikh Abu Risha, and local officials in Ramadi, including Governor Ahmed Khalaf, who were focused on organizing tribal fighters to oust ISIL from populated areas.

Over the first two weeks of January, these local and tribal leaders made requests to the central government for additional resources, weapons, and a common strategy to reclaim the streets from ISIL and other militant groups. The GOI dispatched the acting Defense Minister, Sadoun Dulaimi, to fulfill these requests and finalize a military and political plan. (Dulaimi is from Anbar and a member of one of its largest tribes. He has been in Ramadi nearly full-time since this crisis began.)

These coordinated efforts have begun to produce results. Fighting continues in the outskirts of Ramadi, but the central city is increasingly secure with a critical mass of tribes having pledged to fight ISIL to ensure that they cannot return. This quick albeit fragile turnaround in Ramadi, with serious and regular coordination between local and national leaders, may provide a model for how we can best ensure that 2014 is a year in which the tide begins to turn once again against ISIL inside Iraq.

The Fallujah situation is far more serious, as hundreds of ISIL fighters have joined ranks with former insurgent groups to consolidate control of the inner city, and contest areas in small towns nearby. The Iraqi army is now working to establish a cordon from the outskirts of the city, in coordination with local tribes, but they face well-trained snipers armed with 50-caliber rifles. On January 26, approximately a dozen Iraqi soldiers were captured near Fallujah. Some were later paraded around the city in the back of a pickup truck flying the al-Qa'ida flag. The next day, ISIL posted a video showing their gruesome execution, daring the army to enter the city.

The army, thus far, has not taken the bait. It remains on the city's outskirts, working to execute a strategy similar to what proved effective in Ramadi. There had been reports of army units randomly shelling Fallujah's neighborhoods, but

Iraqi commanders have denied this (blaming ISIL), and tribal figures have since confirmed that military operations are being coordinated with local actors.

At this moment, Fallujah is the scene of a tense standoff. Some tribes are ready and preparing to fight ISIL, others are working with ISIL (and forming “tribal councils” with declared intention to fight the army), and more are on the fence, waiting to see which side is likely to prevail in the end. Local leaders in Anbar, in coordination with the GOI, are working to recruit more tribes to enter, clear, and hold Fallujah, while ensuring civilians and families can leave the city.

This standoff will not last forever. The GOI has the responsibility to help local leaders secure the city and oust the militants now in control. Under the plan that is being developed by the GOI in coordination with local leaders, the army will seek to control outlying areas and cordon the city; tribal fighters will then seek to take the lead in securing populated areas, with military support when needed. We know from experience how difficult this will be, and U.S. military officers from the Office of Security Cooperation are in regular touch with their Iraqi counterparts to share lessons learned, offer advice, and make recommendations.

ISIL has also made its intentions clear: move from a new base of operations in Fallujah to Baghdad – a distance of under 30 miles. Its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had this to say in a rare audio statement issued on January 21:

“As for ISIS in Iraq: Be in the frontlines against the Shia, and march toward Baghdad and the South, keep the Shia busy in their own areas. Know that the entire Sunni population and the brothers in Syria are watching you.”

Were there any doubt, moreover, of the threat Baghdadi and his network – now with approximately 2,000 fighters in Iraq – presents to the United States and our interests in the region, his statement said this in its concluding paragraph:

“Our last message is to the Americans. Soon we will be in direct confrontation, and the sons of Islam have prepared for such a day. So watch, for we are with you, watching.”

Developing a Long-Term Iraqi Strategy: Political, Economic, Security

Drawing on our own lessons learned, we are also encouraging the GOI to develop and execute a holistic strategy to isolate and defeat ISIL over the long-term. This strategy fuses political, security, and economic components with an immediate focus on incorporating tribal fighters to protect the population in towns and

villages throughout the provinces of Anbar, Ninewa, and Sal ah Din. These tribal fighters would work in coordination with local officials, local police, and the army when needed, to deny space and sanctuary for an organized ISIL presence.

Such a strategy is extremely difficult to develop and execute in a dynamic tribal environment like Anbar province. But in recent weeks, we have seen a new level of commitment from the GOI to mobilize the local population against ISIL. Over the course of January, the GOI cabinet has allocated resources to ensure local people taking up arms against extremist groups enjoy full state benefits in the event they are killed or wounded. Importantly, the GOI has committed to incorporating these fighters into the security structures of the state once fighting concludes.

Regarding economic support, in January alone, the GOI allocated \$18 million for rebuilding projects in Fallujah and Ramadi; \$17 million for direct humanitarian assistance; and \$3.4 million for direct payments to tribal fighters. As noted above, Sadoun Dulaimi has remained in Ramadi to oversee allocation of these resources. Our team in Baghdad is in direct and regular contact with all relevant actors, and urging them to ensure resources reach intended recipients as soon as possible.

In my own visits to Baghdad last month, including one just last week, I found the national leadership increasingly attuned to the necessity of enlisting popular support as a necessary condition for defeating ISIL. I also detected, for the first time, acknowledgement that GOI missteps over the course of 2013 may have made the situation worse, and that this coming year must be different in terms of strategy and execution. As the GOI spokesman told the *Washington Post* last week:

“We are supplying [the tribes] with more weapons and whatever they need. They will be treated like any troop in the Iraqi army. They will have salaries and pensions and any right a troop in the Iraqi army has.”

This statement articulates precisely what must be done, and fairly reflects my own hard conversations with local and national leaders over this past month.

Finally, at the national political level, we are focused on ensuring that the political process remains on track, most importantly with national elections on April 30th. More than forty coalitions have registered to compete in these elections, which will choose a parliament to form a new government to serve through 2018.

One cannot overstate the importance of these elections, and we have made clear to all Iraqi leaders that they must happen on time, with oversight by the Independent

High Electoral Commission (IHEC) and the United Nations Mission in Iraq (UNAMI). The work by IHEC and UNAMI, thus far, has been heroic, and we will continue to support their missions between now and Election Day.

Security Measures (and focused U.S. Support)

Political and economic initiatives are necessary for defeating a network like ISIL. But they are not sufficient. From our own experience, we know that while success is impossible without mobilizing the population, such popular mobilization will not last absent focused and persistent security operations. The tribes will fight, but they must be confident that they are going to win and be recognized when the fighting is over – not left to the mercy of ISIL reprisals. For this to happen, ISIL networks must be constantly pressured, and their safe havens destroyed.

Consistent with ISIL's rise last summer, a series of armed camps – staging areas and training grounds – were spotted in western Iraq. The existence of these camps demonstrated a shortfall in the capacity of the ISF. Even where camps could be located, through persistent ISF reconnaissance platforms, such as manned King Air platforms, the ISF lacked the ability to target effectively, thereby providing ISIL safe haven just miles from populated areas.

Iraq's lack of armored helicopters was a glaring example. Iraqi pilots, over the course of 2013, often flew thin-skinned helicopters towards ISIL camps defended by PKC machine guns and anti-aircraft platforms. The result was helicopters shot up and crews (many of whom we had trained) suffering grievous wounds. This situation was not sustainable, and the GOI requested our urgent assistance.

I want to thank this Committee, in particular, for working so closely with us over the past six months to approve the Apache helicopter lease and sale through our Foreign Military Sales program. While this is not an immediate remedy to the current problem, they will provide the ISF with the most effective platform possible for denying ISIL a safe haven in the remote western deserts of Iraq. They will also ensure that we can provide effective oversight on the end use of attack helicopter systems, as well as influencing planning and operations.

Similarly, the Iraqis have recently proven effective at deploying Hellfire missiles against remote ISIL targets from a Caravan aircraft. The ISF have equipped Caravans to launch Hellfire strikes, but the overall supply of Hellfire missiles was not adequate to tackle the threat and number of targets they had located and surveyed. Again, thanks to close coordination with this Committee, this situation has begun to change. We delivered 75 Hellfire missiles in December, and have

notified Congress of a potential sale of up to 500 more. Our objective is to ensure that ISIL can never again gain safe haven in western Iraq.

Consistent with this strategy, we will deliver 10 Scan Eagle surveillance UAVs this spring, and 48 Raven UAVs later this year, all of which, when used in combination with other platforms, can provide regular surveillance of the Jazeera region and the Iraq-Syria border. As Director of National Intelligence Clapper noted in recent testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the “greater two way flow of Sunni extremists between Syria and Iraq” has a direct bearing on ISIL’s ability to conduct high-profile attacks in Iraq. To be successful, thus, a long-term strategy must focus on security and surveillance in these areas.

Finally, we have increased bilateral and regional training opportunities for Iraqi counterterrorism (CT) units, and expedited deliveries of key CT-related equipment for Iraq’s most elite and disciplined units. U.S. trainers with the Embassy’s Office of Security Cooperation are also conducting non-operational training with these high-end Iraqi operators, and Iraq and Jordan have discussed the possibility of advanced training for Iraqi forces in Jordan. We fully support this initiative.

All of this assistance comes in the context of the holistic strategy discussed above, short of which, long-term stability will not be possible. This was a point General Austin pressed home with Prime Minister Maliki and other key leaders in a visit to Baghdad last week: security, economics, and politics, must be fused together.

Before concluding, I would like to say a brief word to our men and women who served so bravely in these areas of Iraq. I cannot imagine what it must have been like to see al-Qa’ida raise its flag once again in the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi. I was sickened by the spectacle. But I want to ensure everyone who served, and this Committee, that we will do everything possible to help the Iraqis take back their streets. The situation in Ramadi is slowly improving, and we will support the Iraqis – and the tribes of Anbar province – to secure the city of Fallujah.

Conclusion

Vital U.S. interests are at stake in Iraq. While my testimony today has focused on the threat from ISIL, the issues of oil, regional stability, and Iranian influence, are also central to our policy during this pivotal new year. I look forward to working closely with this Committee to ensure that we are doing all we can to protect and

advance U.S. interests month-to-month. Thank you again for the opportunity to address these complex issues today. I look forward to answering your questions.